

## SUZHOU

# Toward the Co-evolution and Mutual Prosperity of Culture and Economy

TEXT: SUZHOU SPATIAL PLANNING THINK TANK

Suzhou was awarded the 2014 prize for its success in balancing economic growth with protection of cultural and built heritage. Suzhou is charting a path where heritage and progress coexist. By harmonising urban development with cultural preservation, the city ensures that its 2,500-year legacy remains vibrant amid ongoing transformation.

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Historic cityscape of Suzhou Ancient City.  
Image: Suzhou Spatial Planning Think Tank





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### Introduction: A Living Tapestry of Time

Nestled between the Yangtze River Delta's economic dynamism and China's cultural soul, Suzhou has redefined urban governance by weaving its 2,500-year legacy into a modern tapestry of innovation. The city has balanced economic growth and heritage protection through close collaboration with its vast ecosystem—comprising cultural institutions, public and private sector organisations, as well as local communities. This article examines how its multi-stakeholder strategies, encompassing historic preservation, industrial transformation, and knowledge sharing, have successfully positioned the city as a nexus of local ingenuity and global impact.

### A Symphony of Heritage and Modernity

Preserving the ancient city of Suzhou's thousand-year prosperity requires skillful and systematic management of complex engineering endeavour. Critical to Suzhou's precise harmonising of urban development and cultural preservation is its dual-track governance model that integrates top-down coordination with bottom-up engagement.

Top-down governance forms the backbone of its strategy. Since 1986, the city has adopted a master plan that balances "comprehensive ancient city protection with new modern district development". To alleviate pressure on its historic core, Suzhou has redirected industrial expansion



Renovation of historical buildings in Suzhou's ancient city.  
Image: Suzhou Spatial Planning Think Tank



The Ancient City Cell Anatomy Project.  
Image: Suzhou Spatial Planning Think Tank



to its eastern and western satellite areas, resulting in the Suzhou Industrial Park and Hi-tech Zone developments, respectively.

To preserve its historic cityscape of "small bridges, flowing water, white walls, and black tiles", Suzhou has also imposed strict regulations, including 24-metre building height limits and relocation of polluting industries. The Suzhou National Historical-Cultural City Conservation Leadership Group was established to coordinate cross-departmental collaboration, ensuring alignment between spatial planning and cultural priorities.

Complementing this framework is bottom-up innovation. The Ancient City Cell Anatomy Project, for example, involves residents in documenting intangible heritage and architectural details, such as courtyards, across 54 traditional neighbourhoods, to provide granular data about adaptive reuse strategies, while fostering community stewardship. Pingjiang Historic District further exemplifies resident-inclusive conservation as 65% of Ming-Qing courtyard houses remain resident-occupied during structural reinforcement, and upgrades of sanitation and fireproofing systems. This approach maintains authentic community networks whilst achieving a 92% resident satisfaction rate in liveability surveys.

Under the Ancient City Protection and Renewal Partnership Plan (2023), the district has digitally released—on an online platform— a listing of historic buildings and traditional residences held

by state-owned enterprises that are suitable for adaptive reuse. Through models such as open leasing and cooperative development, diverse stakeholders are engaged in the preservation and utilisation of these heritage structures. By establishing new exemplars and pathways for revitalising its historical architecture, this initiative has strengthened cultural conservation and heritage transmission whilst protecting the ancient city.

Collaborative platforms like the Ancient City Architectural Workshop (2021) epitomise hybrid governance. International design teams, local artisans, and residents co-create guidelines for micro-renewals, blending traditional craftsmanship with sustainable technologies. This "design camp" model has resolved over 120 heritage reuse dilemmas, such as integrating modern utilities into timber-frame buildings without compromising aesthetics.



Pingjiang Historic District.  
Image: Suzhou Spatial Planning Think Tank



Jinji Lake, located in the business district of Suzhou Industrial Park.  
Image: Suzhou Spatial Planning Think Tank

By institutionalising vertical accountability and horizontal co-creation, Suzhou has demonstrated that cultural heritage can thrive as a living asset rather than remain a static relic. It has achieved a 98% preservation rate for its 2,500-year-old urban fabric, alongside sustained economic growth.

### A Synergy of Innovation and Inclusion

Established in 1994 as a Sino-Singaporean collaboration, Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) adopted a pioneering master planning system that prioritised long-term sustainability over short-term gains. For three decades, SIP has embodied Suzhou's vision of "open innovation" by steadfastly advancing its industry-city integration, guided by a people-oriented planning philosophy that develops well-balanced urban functions.

SIP fosters a symbiotic relationship between economic sectors and urban infrastructure. Through the strategic zoning of commercial, residential, and public service hubs, SIP ensures equitable access to high-quality amenities while ensuring organic synergy between production and living spaces. For instance, SIP's BioBAY features high-tech enterprises clustered with research institutions, while adjacent residential areas offer affordable housing, schools, and hospitals.

Developing this "15-minute living circle" ensures workers can access a broad range of amenities within short distances, thereby enhancing quality of life while reducing commute times. This approach underpins SIP's success in harmonising economic dynamism with cultural vibrancy and liveable urban design. By 2023, SIP had attracted over 8,000 companies, including 1,200 R&D



Pedestrian-friendly public realm along Jinji Lake's waterfront.  
Image: Suzhou Spatial Planning Think Tank

institutions, while maintaining an urbanisation rate of 92%.

The planning of SIP has always reflected its people-oriented approach and commitment to maintaining environmental sustainability and quality of life for residents. The rejuvenation of the Jinji Lake waterfront space showcases not only the foresight involved in the park's planning but also its capacity for transformation as it adapts to change. For SIP, transformation is not a mere pursuit of trends but a deliberate and systematic adjustment grounded in profound understanding of urban development principles.

Initial plans for Jinji Lake featured ample open spaces and landscaped greenery, forming a continuous and barrier-free waterfront corridor that integrates existing paths and eliminates accessibility breakpoints. Recent renovations to the lake's circular walking and cycling routes have added interactive lighting systems and expanded commercial terraces to create a multifunctional public realm that blends leisure, culture, and sustainable tourism. Nodes like the Right Bank Art Plaza and Cultural Corridor blend traditional Suzhou aesthetics with modern

design and provide additional venues for hosting art exhibitions and cultural events to enhance cultural identity and tourism.

The development of SIP proves that economic vitality and cultural enrichment need not be mutually exclusive. The innovative soul of SIP drives its self-renewal and transcendence. By embedding integrated planning and people-oriented design, SIP continues to create a vibrant and sustainable urban ecosystem.

### A Catalyst for Collaborative Creativity

Launched in 2024, the Suzhou Ancient City Innovation Competition demonstrates the city's solid progress in advancing open innovation transformation in support of urban governance. As a member of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize (LKYWCP) Network, Suzhou is leveraging this global competition platform to crowdsource ideas for heritage preservation and urban rejuvenation.

The inaugural competition attracted over 230 participants from 26 countries, including students



Award Ceremony of the 2024 Suzhou Ancient City Innovation Competition.

Image: WUPEN

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and professionals from around the world, representing renowned institutions like Harvard University, Cambridge University, and Milan Polytechnic. Focusing on collaborative problem-solving, the 10 finalist teams presented solutions combining historical preservation with modern functionality. These projects were evaluated by a judging panel of international experts, including a LKYWCP Secretariat representative, to ensure technical rigour and artistic merit. They also offered valuable feedback to the participants.

As Suzhou's approach of integrating digital intelligence with heritage conservation embodies an increasingly important global perspective, participants were encouraged to explore AI-driven scenarios for empowering the rejuvenation of ancient public spaces. For instance, the 2024 winning entry from the University of Queensland proposed transforming Cangjie Street into a place where vibrant features of the Song Dynasty can be reimagined through innovative virtual and spatial interventions. By providing unique sensory experiences to visitors, these interventions explore different ways of experiencing and



Exhibition at the Taohuawu Art Museum.  
Image: WUPEN



Historical building before adaptive reuse.  
Image: Yin Ming



Historical building after adaptive reuse.  
Image: Yin Ming

interacting with the past. Making each visit feel special and leaving a memorable impression will encourage visitors to return for more experiences.

A key priority of the competition was to promote public participation through interactive initiatives. A month-long exhibition at the Taohuawu Art Museum allowed citizens to experience the creative proposals firsthand, while a virtual online gallery on the WUPEN platform enabled these solutions to be shared and accessed globally. Over 50,000 people attended the online lectures featuring renowned heritage experts, underscoring the community's passion for cultural heritage preservation. The competition had not only produced innovative solutions, it also forged a sustainable model for ancient city rejuvenation by blending global talent and public passion with cutting-edge technology.

As Suzhou continues to push the boundaries of heritage revitalisation and adaptive reuse, it stands as a testimony to the power of collaborative innovation in preserving cultural legacy for future generations. On top of this, Suzhou has cultivated a culture of civic innovation by welcoming citizens as co-designers, instead of just beneficiaries. Suzhou's wealth of hands-on experience positions it at the forefront to provide suggestions for cities seeking grassroots support for advancing their sustainable development agendas.

## A Vision for the Future

Suzhou's journey from ancient city to becoming a global innovation centre offers valuable lessons in collaborative urbanism. By fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships, prioritising heritage preservation, and embracing innovation, the city has created a model that resonates both locally and globally. In Suzhou, the past is not a relic but a foundation. It is a testament to how cities can thrive by weaving together stakeholders into a shared tapestry of progress.

As the city advances its "dual-faced embroidery"<sup>1</sup> of ancient charm and modern dynamism, and continues to accelerate the sharing of its urbanisation experience globally, Suzhou's model offers a compelling vision: collaboration for urban development, when rooted in cultural stewardship, can provide a solution for harmonious coexistence and yield mutual prosperity in culture and economy. 🧵

[1] "Dual-faced embroidery" ("双面绣") refers to one of the most admired traditional Chinese embroidery techniques, where highly skilled artisans stitch on a single piece of fine silk fabric to simultaneously produce elegant designs on both the front and back of the fabric.